

MITHRAISM: A RELIGION FOR THE ANCIENT MEDES

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Among the major kingdoms of the Near East, that of the Medes in north-west Iran is surely the most enigmatic. Their later reigns, at any rate, fall in the full light of history, yet we know next to nothing of the internal workings of their state. One reason is the likelihood that they possessed no system of written record which could have come down to us. Despite hypotheses put forward by several authorities that the Old Persian cuneiform writing system could have originated under the Medes, no inscription or writing attributable to the period before the Achaemenids has been securely identified. The more credible view is that the Medes had no written language. It is in harmony with this conclusion, of course, that the Zoroastrian scriptures of the *Avesta*, parts of which on any reckoning must date back into Median times, are known to have been transmitted orally for centuries, even after the rise of the Achaemenids.

So far as the dynastic history of Media is concerned, Herodotus presents a summary variously received by different scholars. According to his sequence, the founder of the Median kingdom was one Deioces, originally a respected judge, who, around B.C. 700 prevailed on his fellow-tribesmen to nominate him king, provide a palace and royal protocol, and found a central city, Hagmatana, to be the capital of their state. The next ruler, supposedly his son, was Phraortes, who extended Median rule over adjoining chiefdoms, including Persia. So reinforced, he rose against the power of Assyria, but was defeated and killed. He in turn was followed by Cyaxares, who reorganized the Median army, separating archers, cavalry and spearmen, and even laid siege to Nineveh. In any event, the Medes appear to have played an important role in introducing the horse into western Asia, and previously no doubt providing recruits for the Assyrian cavalry. However, an incursion by Scythians, under Madyes, son of Prothyas, raised the siege. They defeated Cyaxares, and established their domination in northern Iran, at least according to Herodotus, for 28 years.

Eventually the Median king succeeded in massacring their chiefs at a banquet, and expelling them from the country. He then returned, finally in 612 B.C. to besiege and sack Nineveh, bringing to an end the ruthless Assyrian empire. He was succeeded by his son Astyages, reigning a further 35 years before his overthrow by the Persians under Cyrus the Great.

Several of the historian's details are to some degree confirmed in the cuneiform sources. "Partatua, king of the Scythians" seems to match with Protothyas. "Phraortes, son of Deioces" has been identified with the "Kashtaritu" of other omen texts. This connection depends on the statement in the Bisitun inscription that the Median rebel of that day, Fravartish (Phraortes), claimed to be "Khshathrita, of the family of Cyaxares", attesting a relationship between the two names. A link, though more precarious, has even been sought between the "Daiukku, governor of Mannea" of Sargon II's Assyrian annals for 715 B.C., and the Herodotean Deioces. Yet while Helm (1981, p. 87), of recent writers, concluded the Median narrative of Herodotus "preserves no trustworthy historical information about the Medes prior to the reign of Cyaxares", Brown (1988, p. 86), on the other hand, maintained of Helm's arguments that "no sound reasons emerge to doubt the essentials of the *Mêdikos Logos* (Median narrative of Herodotus) or its basic chronology, except the nature and duration of the Scythian episode". Thus the Herodotean narrative remains a necessary point of reference, with its chronology placing the four reigns in c. 700 B.C., 647 B.C., 625 B.C., and 585 B.C.

Turning to other sources of information, from the archaeological data we have some information about the material culture of the Medes. We can conclude that they inaugurated the building of columned halls in Iran, an innovation culminating in the great Achaemenid *apadanas*. The single, puzzling example at Nush-i Jan suggests that they had some type of enclosed temple cult, involving also the use of what might, in very broad terms, be called a fire-altar. Fortifications with high, concentric walling, and rectangular towers as in the Assyrian sculptures (cf. Ghirshman, p. 85, Fig. 34, from Botta's sculptures lost in the Tigris) and described in the Herodotean account of Ekbatana, were again actually revealed in the excavations at Nush-i Jan. Median sites, including the last, also possessed descending blind tunnels, but whether these were unsuccessful wells, or served some ritual use remains uncertain.

There is evidence that the Medes left an important legacy of metalwork. The goldwork of Ziwieh (Fig. 1: Metropolitan Museum, New York; Assyrianizing metalwork from Ziwieh) has been an area of controversy owing to its unscientific discovery. Nevertheless there could be little serious doubt of the antiquity of two groups of material attributed to this find. The first consists of gold panels in Assyrianizing style, representing a variety of composite creatures in confronted symmetrical rows, or flanking a vegetal motif characterized as the "Tree of Life". The second group displays rows of repeated animal forms, often of ibexes, hares, or beak-heads, evidently applied with punches to the metal surfaces. Unprejudiced commentators, Dandamaev and Lukonin (1989, p. 80-1), entertained the view that "*.. there is still no direct evidence which would permit us to regard part of the Ziwieh treasure as the masterpieces with which Median art began; but this hypothesis seems very tempting*".

They pointed out that these styles seem to continue into the art of the Achaemenids. We may add that they appear there prominently in the accessories worn with the cold-weather trouser costume typical of the Medes, such as the dagger called *akinakes*, and the battle-axe known as *sagaris*. Moreover, the Russian scholars appositely recalled the building inscription at Susa, which states: "The goldsmiths who wrought the gold were Medes and Egyptians".

More inferential, no doubt, are other indications of Median religion. The hypothesis that the Mithraism of Roman times could have derived from the Medes is hardly new. Its most obvious evidence comes from the name of the deity himself. It is generally assumed that its prevalent form, Mithra, and in Latin Mithras, exemplifies the Median dialect of Western Old Iranian (Brandenstein and Mayrhofer, 1964, pp. 12-13); and that the form Miça, found in some compounded personal names, represents the dialect of Fars, that is to say Old Persian. We shall see later that *xšaθrapati-*, an epithet of Apollo attested in the Aramaic version of the trilingual inscription of Pixodarus from Xanthos in Lycia, also exemplifies this typically Median feature. We shall argue later that this epithet, with similar Median phonetics, had an important link with Mithraism,³ and is another indication of its Median connections.

References in Manichaean literature suggest that the heresiarch Mani knew recollections of Mithraism lingering in provincial areas under the

early Sasanian Empire, since some features he mentions do not belong to Zoroastrianism, nor to his own religion. In his text presented to Shapur I, the *Šābuhrāgān* (cf. Mackenzie, 1979, p. 505 and 513), he twice lists an array of deities designated *mānbed* "lord of the household", *vīšbed* "lord of the village", *zandbed* "lord of the tribe", *dehbed* "lord of the country" and, incongruously, *pahragbed* "lord of the frontier-post", with the further enigmatic addition of *devān nexrustār* "the tormentor of the demons". It is clear that in this sequence of widening territorial responsibility, the term *pahragbed* is out of place. Its logical replacement will appear shortly.

A similar sequence of dignitaries can also be found in Zoroastrian sources. In the *Mihr Yasht* (*Yasht* 10:115), the same sequence of territorial authorities is specified, but instead of *pahragbed* we find the term offered is Zarathustrōtama, "the representative of Zoroaster". In this context, it is less clear that the sequence is made up of deities, since they are specified as *ratus*, an apparent ecclesiastical title which may possibly signify "judges". Still it is evident that the fifth term in the series is not that which would logically occupy this place. It appears that here, as in the last instance, a substitution has been made for a designation not acceptable either for the Manichaeans or the Zoroastrians. The fifth term logically required would in fact be *šahrbed* "Lord of the Kingdom", which is the Middle Persian realization of the form *xšaθrapati*-. Obviously, for Zoroastrians devoted to Ahuramazdā, any deity identified by the title *šahrbed*, — as we shall see an emanation of Mithra — could not be acknowledged as "Lord of the Kingdom". The attitude of the Manichaeans was similar, yet neither could they accept the Zoroastrian formula. So they produced another almost random designation alluding vaguely to Manichaean texts.

W. Sundermann (1979a, pp. 101-2) has investigated designations applied to this Iranian "pentad" in the Manichaean texts. He finds that besides their "territorial" nomenclature, they are also identified both as astral beings, and as personal deities. Mithra, of course, is in astral terms represented as the Sun. He is surrounded, in this mythology, by a pentad of "offspring" (Sundermann, 1979b, p. 779), who are identified at once by the territorial designations, with the five planets, and with five personal deities well known in the Iranian tradition. Thus the first son is designated as *dahibed*; the third son as *vīšbed*, but also as Wahrām; the fourth son (or perhaps child, since the personification is female) as *zandbed*, but also as

Spendarmad. This last example is thus identified, incongruously in this case, not with a pagan goddess, but with the Zoroastrian Amarasfand. We may see it as another "sanitization" of a more ancient creed, to accommodate the doctrines both of the Manichaeans, and indeed the Zoroastrians. We may guess that in the original pagan context the female member of the Pentad should have been Nana, goddess of the planet Venus (and perhaps also the Earth), and a prominent figure in the heterodox Zoroastrianism of the Kushan coinage.

Granted these clues to the membership of the Pentad, it is not hard to see that it is the planets which are designated the "children of the sun". They are identified at once by the territorial designations *manbed*, *visbed*, *zandbed*, *dahibed*, and by the planetary personalities of Mercury, Venus, Mars, and Jupiter, in turn equated with the Iranian "pagan" deities Tīr, Nana, Wahrām, and presumably Ohrmīzd, though as the ruling deity of the Zoroastrian religion, the role of the last is not stressed by Manichaeans. We may, however, detect a further planet in Sundermann's list. Ancient astronomers maintained that the eclipses were caused by a gigantic dragon spread across the heavens, and obscuring the sun and moon with its head and tail. In Sundermann's table, we find also "The Lord of the Eclipses, Ahriman". This too was seen to rotate in the manner of a planet, and might count in the planetary array, though the Evil Spirit could not be presented as a child of Mithra, and this is not claimed in the sources.

There is still one other member of the Pentad to be considered, that of the highest rank. The *xšaθra-pati* of the Xanthos inscription, "Lord of the Kingdom", clearly stands at the head of the sequence above. The Middle Persian form is evidently *šahrbed*. This name is obviously suppressed, as we have seen, both in the Manichaean Middle Persian texts and in the Zoroastrian scriptures. In a Sogdian Manichaean text, however, for the First Son of Mithra the form *xšyšpt Bγw* is found, evidently the cognate development in that dialect (Gershevitch, 1954, p. 46, para. 299), so explicitly confirming the identification.

In the broader archaeological context, this divinity, *šahrbed*, re-appears in a well-known form. A little analysis shows that when this divine name is rendered into Greek, the opening sibilant would be reduced to *sigma*. With the addition of the further terminal *sigma* for the Greek third declension nominative, the *delta* would be elided, so the resulting form would be

Sarapis. This is of course the name of a celebrated deity, in current understanding usually associated with Egypt, but attested also in northern Anatolia, Syria, and even the Gurgan province of Iran. The radical upshot of the discussion is that Sarapis belongs not to an Egyptian, nor to a Classical, but to an Iranian pantheon, being one of the subsidiary gods of Mithraism, one of the planetary "children of the Sun". Specifically, in fact, this is the emanation of Mithra as deity of the state. By elimination, his planet is no doubt Saturn, designated as Zurvan in the Iranian tradition. One should note that for the Zoroastrians the planets were anathematized as evil beings, an attitude hardly surprising in a reformed religion designed to supersede the worship of the Medes.

I pass now to the question whether Mithraic iconography can be found in the pre-Christian era, and if so, how far back. Some archaeologists of the Roman period argue that the Mithraism of those times has no essential eastern connection, and was possibly invented by some Roman devotee in the first or second century A.D. This contention immediately conflicts with the fact that iconography reminiscent of Mithraism is found on coins of the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom, both under the Bactrian king Plato in c. 145 B.C., and under Hermaeus, in c. 100 B.C. respectively (Bivar, 1998, p. 41). Thus it appears a Mithra cult, distinct from his role in Zoroastrianism, existed already at these dates, extending over a wide area.

Informative in this connection are the murals discovered in a Mithraeum at Capua (Fig. 2: Capua: Mithraeum at Santa Maria Vetere. After M.J. Vermaseren, 1971). Scenes are shown from the ceremonies of Mithraic initiation, in one of which the neophyte, naked, is shown kneeling, while the *mystagogus* stands behind him, placing his foot on the neophyte's calf. The neophyte hands back with his left hand a vessel to the *mystagogus*. We may infer that the candidate has drained a hypnotic draught, which will cause him to sleep and experience visions, but may, perhaps, involve danger of poisoning. It is the gesture of the initiator's foot which concerns us here. This is also found in a large number of other images having a connection with Mithraism. There is a possibility, where this is not proven, we could still justly infer that a Mithraic connection might exist.

In the scene of the typical Mithraic bull-sacrifice, the anthropomorphic Mithra dominates the bull. Routinely, he places his right foot behind the

bull's leg in a similar gesture. One doubts whether such a move would be effective in controlling a plunging bull, and we may again interpret it as a symbolic gesture. Passing to a further explicitly Mithraic example, on a bronze coin of Gordian III from Tarsus dating from about A.D. 242 (Fig. 3: British Museum. Bronze coin of Gordian III from Tarsus) we see once more the familiar tauroctony, the only variation being that the sacrificer now wears the armour of a Roman soldier. Another closely related issue of Tarsus (Bivar, 1998, Fig. 16) shows the slaughter of the bull not by an anthropomorphic figure, but by a lion. It is, I think, clearly established that the lion is the zoomorphic symbol of Mithra, and once more, the beast places his paw behind the leg of the victim. Moreover, this zoomorphic issue presents an obvious allusion to a famous coinage of some 574 years previously: that of, Persian satrap of Tarsus on the eve of Alexander's arrival in 332 B.C. (British Museum, *Catalogue of Greek coins: Lycaonia, Isauria and Cilicia*, London, 1900, p. 171, no. 51, Pl. XXX, 12; cf. Bivar, 1998, Fig. 23). Once more, the lion slaughters the bull, placing its hind paw behind the leg of the bull in the gesture we may now accept as canonical. For convenience I am applying to this gesture the term "the Mithraic hold".

I must turn for a moment from pursuit of this subject towards pre-history to consider the symbolic meaning of the "Mithraic hold". I have concluded that it should signify the dedication to death of the victim of the sacrifice, probably commencing with the primeval sacrifice of the "Uniquely-created Bull", which has a part in the creation myth, not only of Zoroastrianism, but also, more conspicuously, in the iconography of Roman Mithraism. In the case of the Mithraic initiate, the explanation seems to be, as suggested by the text known as the Mithraic Liturgy (Meyer, 1976), that in order to be received into the presence of the deity, the candidate had to impersonate the sacrificial animal. He was required, on approaching the god, to bellow like a bull, but by virtue of certain mantras with which he was primed, he was coached to prevail upon the god to restore him to mortal life. Presumably his subjection to the "Mithraic hold" was also part of this impersonation.

All the examples of the "Mithraic hold" which I have cited so far are explicitly Mithraic. I pass now to earlier examples where the connection is less obvious, but where there are substantial hints of such an association. In a recently reported group of Persis coins, among drachmae of the dynast

Oborzus (Middle Persian *Whwbrz*) were found examples of a previously unattested type showing on the reverse the slaughter of an armed Greek cleruch by a figure in the costume of the Achaemenid king (Fig. 4: Persis. Drachma of Oborzus, reverse). The slayer once more adopts the posture of the "Mithraic hold". The accompanying Aramaic inscription reads: **dnt zy whwbrz** "Contract of Oborzus". The word "contract" has of course a well-recognized connection with the cult of Mithra (Thieme, 1975, pp. 23, 27-8 etc.). There exists indeed a Greek text (Polyaenus, ed. Melber, VII, 40) describing a stratagem by which Oborzus dispersed a dangerous force of Greek settlers into remote billets, secretly instructing their hosts to regale them with wine, then murder them, and have all buried by the morning. This coin certainly suggests that the conspiracy was carried out under Mithraic secrecy, and an allusion to the cult is entirely credible. I must add one puzzling observation. If one examines the figure of the dying cleruch, it seems that he is represented as ithyphallic. Such iconography is rare in the art of Iran, but we shall return to it later. It may characterize figures regarded as demonic, as later, on some amulets of Sasanian times (cf. Bivar, 1967, p. 519; Gignoux, 1978, p. 76, no. 10.2, Pl. 30 = Gyselen, 1993, p. 87, no. 14.3, Pl. VIII — the best illustration). This remains a typical feature in several of the following examples, and helps to demonstrate the continuity of the iconographic theme.

A more surprising instance of the "Mithraic hold" is the celebrated "Alexander sarcophagus" from Sidon (Fig. 5: Istanbul. "Alexander sarcophagus" from Sidon. Photo ADHB) now in Istanbul. It is believed to be that of Abdalonymus, King of Sidon. During his lifetime he had been a friend of Alexander, and it illustrates historical episodes of the time. The nude and helmeted figure is understood as the God of Death, accompanying Abdalonymus in battle. Again we see the gesture of the "Mithraic hold", as the savage deity slaughters a luckless victim. Should we assume here again an allusion to Mithraism? There is certainly reason to think that Alexander had knowledge of the cult of Sarapis, a deity several times mentioned in the history of Arrian, especially since Alexander once proposed to marry the daughter of Pixodarus, the satrap of the Xanthus inscription already mentioned. He must have made some inquiries concerning the religion of his prospective bride. If we rightly link Sarapis with the cult of Mithra, he, and perhaps also Abdalonymus, could indeed have had knowledge of both deities. Abdalonymus might here allude to some

part in the conspiracy under which Perdiccas, regent after the death of Alexander, was assassinated by his fellow generals. I can only say that I have seen no example of this iconography where a Mithraic allusion is ruled out. A connection here also should be considered.

My purpose however is to carry this iconography back towards Median times. It came to me as a surprise to find the theme already appearing on glyptic of the early Achaemenid period. In the first volume of the spectacular catalogue of the Persepolis Fortification tablets, there are several examples of the "Mithraic hold". We may cite the Catalogue No. 218 / PFS 1566 (Garrison and Root, 2001, I, i 318), the seal of a senior official Abbateya (Fig. 6: Persepolis Fortification tablet, seal of Abbateya. Courtesy Oriental Institute, Chicago). This impression is first attested on tablets in 497 B.C. The "hero" wears the Assyrian kilt, the latter possibly evidence of pre-Achaemenid date. He holds in his right hand a falchion, and with the left grasps the flight-feather of a winged, human-faced ruminant, at the same time pressing down on its back leg with the "Mithraic hold". The sweeping horns suggest that the creature is an ibex, but in the catalogue the beast is described as a "bull creature" on account of its bovine tail. It could indeed be interpreted as some kind of supernatural bull. Once more, the cataloguers note that the beast is depicted as ithyphallic. Again in Catalogue No. 239 / PFS 57, the hero, armed this time with a sling, similarly dominates a "winged horned lion creature" with a "seal-like" head, again ithyphallic. The stone, which bears an Elamite inscription, was first applied on a document of 500 / 501 B.C.

Our next example, which carries us back to the sixth-seventh century B.C. (Fig. 7: Miho Museum, Japan. Silver figure) is in the Miho Museum (Miho Museum, 1998, facing p. 21) in Japan. I am grateful to Mr A. Sou-davar for bringing this, and the next example to my attention, and to Mr Hajime Inegaki, Head of Research at the Miho Museum, for kindly providing me with a copy of their *1st Anniversary Exhibition* catalogue. The group is in silver, with gilded enhancements, showing the heroic hunter, apparently wearing a golden mask, and seizing a human-faced ibex. With his left hand he grasps the creature's wing, while once more impeding its flight with the "Mithraic hold". In his right hand he holds a sword or falchion. As seen from the front, the quarry is in profile, but with its human face turned to the front. The object is unprovenanced, but has been thought

to come from the remarkable find of antiquities discovered in what is called the Kalmakarreh Cave in Lorestan. Numbers of such pieces seem to have been dispersed on the antiquities market, possibly in some cases mingled with forgeries. Associated with this find was apparently a dish with an Elamite inscription, placing that object in the sixth or seventh centuries B.C. We need not doubt that the silver piece under discussion is of pre-Achaemenid date. Its parallelism with the seal-impression, Catalogue 218 / PFS 1566, is remarkable, and strongly suggests that the latter composition, with perhaps others depicted on the earlier Achaemenid sealings, represent not fanciful decorations, but reproductions of specific iconographic forms from an earlier epoch, presumably that of the Medes.

A brief digression is needed to comment on this find of treasure in Lorestan. I am grateful to Dr. B. Overlaet for additional references on this question. Preliminary reports appeared in the *Independent* newspaper, and on a website page <www.michelvanrijn.com/westerncave.htm>. According to the last account, this cave, said to be situated some 15 km NW of the Pol-e Dokhtar (on the Andimeshk-Khorramabad highway) in Lorestan, was visited by representatives of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organisation on survey in 1989, but the concealed treasures did not then come to light. Later, local villagers and antique dealers visited and systematically pillaged the site, recovering a large number of silver objects of unusual character. Some of these were confiscated by the authorities, including apparently a golden mask said now to be in the museum at Khorramabad. Others found their way to Tehran, where some are said to have been confiscated, but may by this time have been mingled with forgeries. A number of pieces, however, evidently found their way into the antiquities market.

If the Miho figure comes from this source, and attests an example of the “Mithraic hold”, what explanation could we seek for the iconography? The notion that the heroic figure of the Achaemenid seals might sometimes represent Mithra is not new, and was noticed by Garrison and Root (2001, I, i, 58) in their monumental presentation. In view of our discussion it is conceivable that this composition might again represent the slaying by Mithra of the primeval bull at the moment of creation. Those authors, as we saw, actually categorize this quarry as a “bull creature”, although its general appearance, with beard and curved horns, is rather that of an ibex.

However, the tail is definitely bovine, not that of a goat. The arrangement of the scene is certainly different from the tauroctony of Roman times, yet most of the details, if we exclude the character of the victim, are present — the “Mithraic hold”, and the sacrificer’s weapon. It is hard to think of a different interpretation of so costly and elaborate an image, and one difficult to understand except in a religious context. This link with the iconography of the seals is certainly important.

Yet a further instance of a possible “Mithraic hold” (Fig. 8: “Urtian” lion hunt. Paris, catalogue Boisregard) in pre-Achaemenid art is provided by a bronze plaque recently featured in a Paris sale catalogue (Boisregard, 26th June 2003) and listed as “Urtian”. An archer pursues a fleeing lion, seizing its tail with his left hand, and pressing down upon its leg with his left foot. The beast rises on its hind legs, and turns back its head with a snarl. Here the iconography is less specific, and the object, lacking provenience, less firmly attributable. However, there is again a close parallel with one of the Persepolis Fortification impressions (Garrison and Root, 2001, I, i, 302), which displays the supposedly Mithraic gesture, and has similar composition (Fig. 9: Persepolis Fortification sealing, Catalogue Number 207 / PFS 43). The earliest dated application of this seal is on a tablet of 503/502 B.C., and it carries a four-line Elamite inscription, naming one Hupan-Kitin, evidently himself an Elamite. The bronze plaque could thus be dated either to early Achaemenid times, or more probably, to the immediately preceding period of the Medes. On the seal-impression the figure of the lion is once more represented as ithyphallic, and the persistence of this detail within the series tends to confirm that we are here concerned with a continuing iconographic theme. Taken separately, each of the seal motifs could be interpreted as a decorative fantasy. However, the close parallels in metal suggest a systematic iconography.

The Empire of the Medes lasted some one hundred and forty years, yet, as observed earlier, knowledge of its material culture, not to speak of its religion, is nearly a blank. The lack of a written language is certainly a difficulty. Yet if forms of esoteric Mithraism, well attested in Roman times, actually extend far back into antiquity, its iconography might help to indicate some Median products, and also support deductions concerning the religion of that state.

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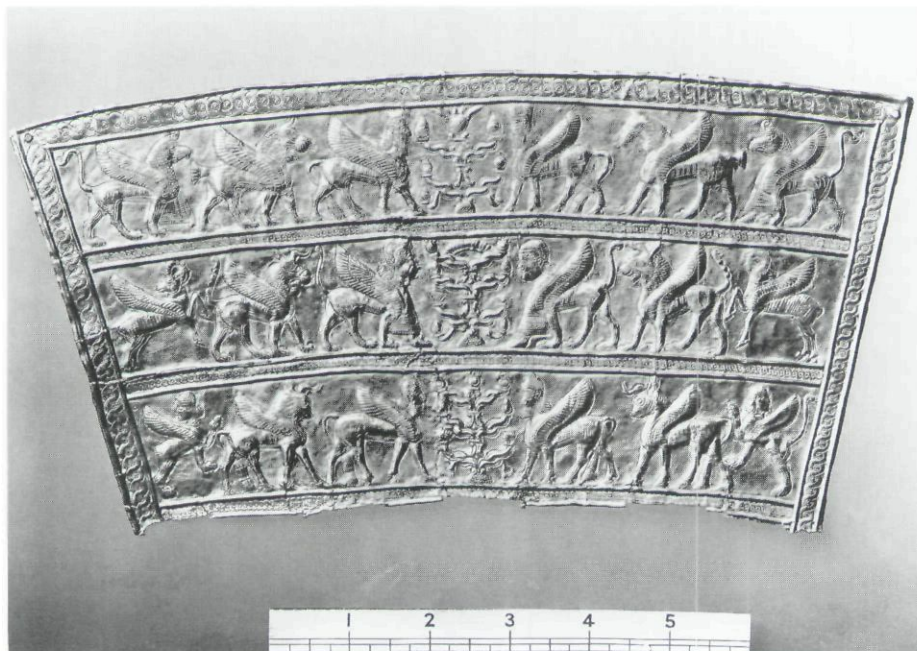


Fig.1: Metropolitan Museum, New York; Assyrianizing metalwork from Ziwieh



Fig. 2: Capua: Mithraeum at Santa Maria Vetere. After M.J. Vermaseren, 1971



Fig. 3: Bronze coin of Gordian III from Tarsus. British Museum, Courtesy of the Trustees.



Fig. 4: Persis. Drachma of Oborzus, reverse. Private collection

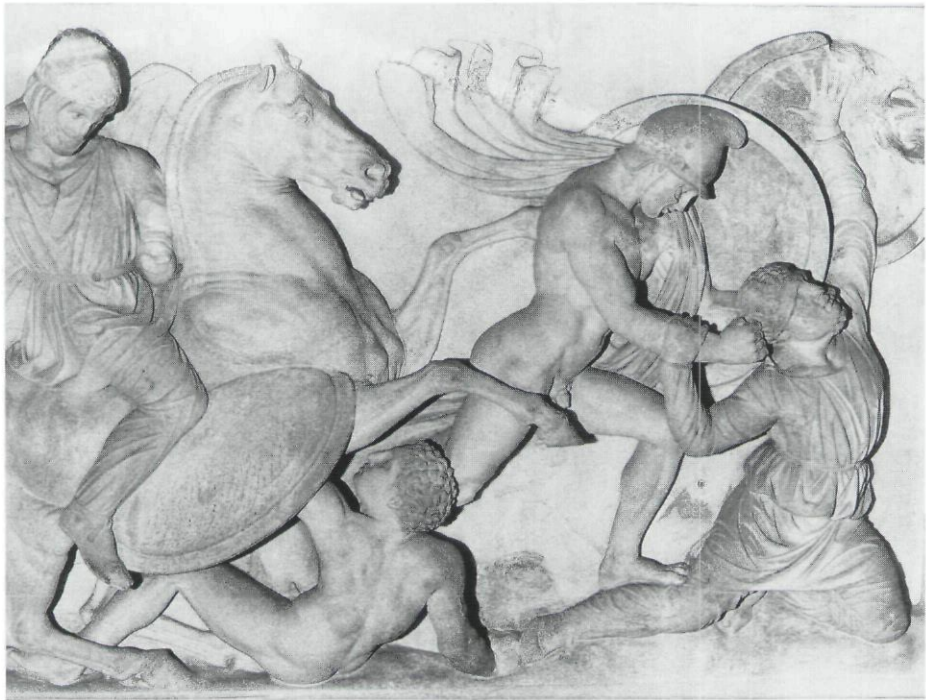


Fig. 5: Istanbul, “Alexander sarcophagus” from Sidon. Photo ADHB

PFS 1566*



Fig. 6: Persepolis Fortification tablet, seal of Abbateya, Catalogue number 218 / PFS 1566. Courtesy Oriental Institute, Chicago



Fig. 7: Miho Museum, Japan. Silver figure. Courtesy Miho Museum



Fig. 8: Paris, catalogue Boisregard: "Urtian" lion hunt

PFS 43*

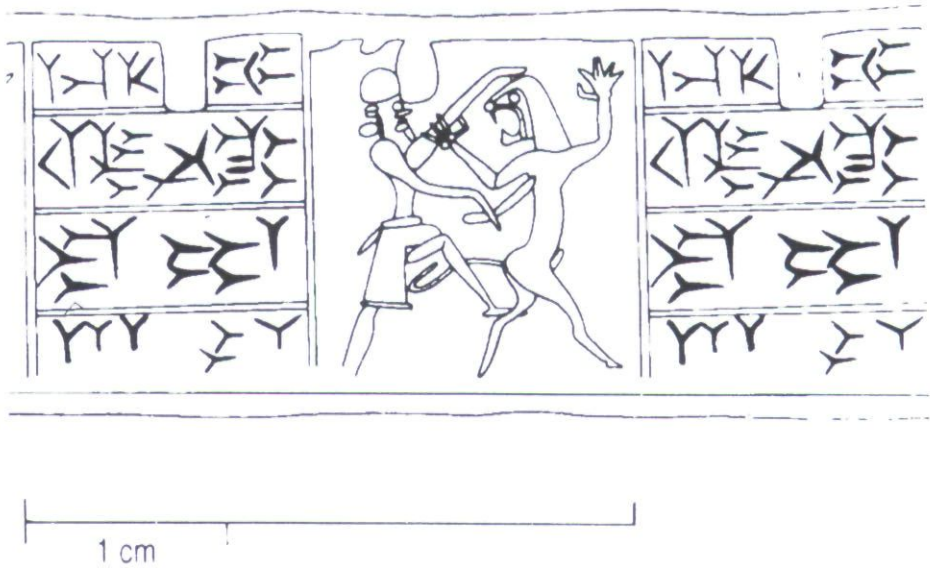


Fig. 9: Persepolis Fortification sealing, Catalogue Number 207 / PFS 43. Courtesy Oriental Institute, Chicago.

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